OUR SHORT STORY PAGE

THE CAPTAIN'S ARM

BY PERCEVAL GIBBON

IN those days the Burdock had a standing charter from Cardiff to Barcelona and back with ore to Swansea, a comfortable round trip which brought the Captain and his son home for one week in every five. It suited the mate's convenience excellently, for he was a man of social habits, and he had at last succeeded in interesting Miss Minnie Davis in his movements. She was the daughter of the Burdock's owner and Arthur Price's cousin in some remote degree, a plump, clean, clever Welsh girl, of quick intelligence and pleasant good nature. He was a tall young man, a little leggy in his way, who filled the eye splendidly. Women said of him that he "looked every inch a sailor;" matrons who watched his progress with Minnie Davis considered that they would make a handsome couple. Captain Price, for all his watchfulness, saw nothing of the affair.

Minnie fell into a way of driving down to see the Burdock off. It was thus that Captain Price learned how matters stood. All was clear for a start and the dock was waiting; Arthur Price, in the gold-laced cap he used as due to his rank, was standing by to cast off. The Captain went forthwith to the bridge; Minnie on the dockhead could see his black shore-hat over the weather cloths and his white collar of ceremony. She smiled a little for she did not know quite enough to see the art with which the Captain drew off from his moorings under his own steam, nor his splendid handling of the big boat as he bustled her down the crowded dock and laid her blunt nose cleanly between the piers of the lock. She was watching the brass-buttoned chief mate lording it on the fo'c'sle head, as he passed the lines to haul into the lock; Captain Price was watching him, too. He saw him smiling and talking over the rail to the girl.

The Captain snorted, and gave his whole attention to hauling out, only turning his head at the last minute to wave a farewell to his owner's daughter. The mud pilot took charge and brought her clear; and as soon as he had gone over to his boat, the Captain rang for full steam ahead and waited for the mate to take the bridge.

The young man came up smiling. "It's a fine morning, father," he remarked as he walked over to the binnacle.

"I don't reckon to slack off and take in my lines myself," went on the Captain. "I reckon to leave that to my officers. And if an officer carries away a five-inch manilla through makin' eyes at girls on the pier head, I dock his wages for the cost of it and I log him for neglectin' his duty."

The mate looked at him sharply for a moment; the Captain scowled back.

"Have you got anything to say to me?" demanded the Captain.

"Yes," said the mate, "I have." He broke into a smile. "But it's something I can't say while you're actin' the man-o'-war Captain on your bridge. It doesn't concern the work o' the ship."

"What does it concern?" asked the Captain.

"Me," said the mate. He folded his arms across the binnacle and looked into his father's face confidently. The Captain softened.

"Well, Arthur?" he said.

"That was Minnie on the pier head," said the mate. The Captain nodded "I was up at their place last night," the young man continued, "and we had a talk—she and I—and so it came about that we fixed things between us. Mr. Davis is agreeable, so long——"

"Hey, what's this?" The Captain stared at his son amazedly. "What was it you fixed up with Minnie?"

"Why to get married," replied the mate, reddening. "I was telling you. Her father's willing, as long as we wait till I get a command before we splice."

"You to marry Minnie!" The mate stiffened at the emphasis on the you. The Captain was fighting for expression. "Why," he said, "why—why, you'd 'a' carried away that hawser if I hadn't sung out at ye."

"Father," said the mate, "Mr. Davis'll give me a ship."

"What ship?" demanded the Captain.

"The first he can," replied the other. "He's thinkin' of buyin' the Stormberg, Wrench, Wylie's big freight and he'd shift you on to her. Then I'd have the Burdock."

"Now, lean off that binnacle," he said shortly. "I want to get the departure."

It was not till an hour later that he went to his cabin to shed his shoregoing gear for ordinary apparel; and as soon as this was done he reached down the register from the book shelf over his bunk to look up the Stormberg.

"H'm," he growled, standing over the book at his desk. "Built in 1889 on the Clyde. I know her style. Five thousand tons and touch the steam steering gear if you dare! Blast her and blast Davis for a junk-buying fool!"

He closed the book with a slam and glanced mechanically up at the tell-tale compass that hung over his bed.

It breezed up that night, and as the Burdock cleared the tail of Cornwall, the heavy Atlantic water came aboard. She was a sound ship, though, and Captain Price knew her as he knew the palms of his hands. Screened behind the high weather clothes, he drove her into it, while the tall seas filled her forward main deck rail-deep and her bows pounded away in a mast-high smother of spray. From the binnacle amidships to the weather wing of the bridge was his dominion, while the watch officer straddled down to leeward; both with eyes boring at the darkness ahead and on either beam, where there came and went the pin-point lights of ships.

Arthur Price relieved the bridge at midnight, but the Captain held on.

"Ye see how she takes it?" he bawled down the wind to his son. "No excuse for steaming wide; ye can drive her to a hair. Keep your eyes on that light to port; we don't want anything bumping into us."

"You wouldn't ease her a bit, then?" shouted the mate, the wind snatching his words.

"Ease her!" was the reply. "You'd have her edging into France. She'll lie her course while we drive her."

When dawn came up the sea had mounted; the Bay was going to be true to its name. Captain Price went to his chart house at midnight, to sleep on a settle; but by his orders the Burdock was kept to her course and her gait, battering away at the gale contentedly. After breakfast, he took another look round and then went below to rest in his bunk, while the tell-tale swam in wild eccentrics above his up-turned face. After a while he dozed off to sleep, lulled by the click of furnishings that rendered to the ship's roll, the drum of the seas on her plates and the swish of loose water across the deck.

He was roused by his steward. That menial laid a hand on his shoulder and he was forthwith awake and competent.

"A ship to windward, sir, showin' flags," said the steward. "The mate 'ud be glad if you'd go to the bridge."

"A'right," said the Captain, and stood up. "In distress, eh?"

"By the looks of her, sir," admitted the steward, who had been a waiter ashore. "She seems to be a mast or two short, sir, so far as I can tell. But I couldn't be sure."

He helped the Captain into his oilskins deftly, pulling his jacket down under the long coat and held the door open for him.

Some three miles to windward the stranger lay, an appealing vagabond. The Captain found his son standing on the flag-chest, braced against a stanchion, watching her through a pair of glasses, when she peeped up, a momentary silhouette, over the tall seas. He turned as the Captain approached.

"Can't make out her flags, sir," he said. "Too much wind. Looks like a barque with only her mizzen standing."

"Gimme the glass," said the Captain, climbing up beside him. He braced himself against the irons and took a look at her, swinging accurately to the roll of the ship. Beneath him the wind-whipped water tumbled in gray leagues; the stranger seemed poised on the rim of it. From her gaff, a dot of a flag showed a blur against the sky and a string from her mast head was equally vague.

"That'll be her ensign upside down at the gaff," he said. "Port your helm there; we'll go down and look at her."

The Captain took his ship round to windward of the distressed vessel, running astern of her within a quarter of a mile. She proved to be the remains of a barque, as the mate had guessed, a deep-laden wooden ship badly swept by the sea. From the wing of the bridge the Captain's glasses showed him the length of her deck, cluttered with the wreck of houses torn up by the roots, while the fall of the spars had taken her starboard bulwarks with it. Her boats were gone; a davit stuck up at the end of the poop crumpled like a ram's horn; and by the taffrail her worn and sodden crew clustered and cheered the Burdock.

The Captain rang off his engines and rang again to stand by in the engine room. The mate came up the ladder to him while his hand was yet at the telegraph.

"Lifeboat's all clear for lowering, sir," he said. "Noble, Peters, Hausen and Ryland are to go in her." He waited.

The old Captain stood looking at the wreck, while the steamship rolled tumultuously in the trough.

"Who goes in charge?" he asked after a minute's silence.

"I'll go, father," said the mate eagerly. He paused, but the Captain said nothing.

"And I'll just see to the hoisting out of that boat," said the Captain. "Good thing I had you put in the new pins."

The third mate on the bridge rang for steam and made a lee for the lowering of the lifeboat.

"Up with her!" shouted the Captain, and she tore loose from her bed. "Veer hauling! Belay! Now out with the davit, men."

He stepped a pace forward as they passed out the line. "Haul away," he was saying, when the bo'sun shouted hoarsely and tried to reach him with a dash across the slippery deck planks. The mate screamed, the Captain humped his shoulders for the blow. It all happened in a flash of disaster; the boat's weight pulled the pin from the checks of the block and down she came, her stern thudding thickly into the deck, while the Captain, limp and senseless, rolled inertly to the scuppers.

When he came to he was in his bunk. He opened his eyes with a shiver upon the familiar cabin, with its atmosphere of compact neatness, its gleaming paint and bright work. A throb of brutal pain in his head wrung a grunt from him, and then he realized that something was wrong with his right arm. He tried to move it, to bring it above the bedclothes to look at it, and the effort surprised an oath from him and left him dizzy and shaking. The white jacket of the steward came through a mist that was about him.

"Better, I hope sir," the steward was saying. "Beggin' your pardon, but you'd better lie still, sir. Is there anything I could bring you, sir?"

"Did the boat fall on me?" asked the Captain, carefully. His voice seemed thin to himself.

"Not on you, sir," replied the steward. "Not so to speak, on top of you. The keel 'it you on the shoulder, sir, an' you contracted a thump on the 'ead."

"And the wreck?" asked the Captain.

"The wreck's crew is aboard, sir, bark Vavasour, of London, sir. The mate brought 'em off most gallantly, sir. I was to tell 'im when you come to, sir."

"Tell him then," said the Captain, and closed his eyes, wearily.

"Well, Arthur," he said.

The tall young mate was beside him.

"Ah, father," he said cheerfully. "Picking up a bit, eh? That's good. Ugly accident, that."

"Yes," replied the Captain, looking up into his face. "Block split, I suppose?"

"Yes," said the mate. "That's it. How do you feel?"

"You didn't notice the block, I suppose, when you put the new pins in?" asked the Captain.

"Can't say I did," answered the mate, "or I'd have changed it. You're not going to blame me, surely, father?"

The Captain smiled. "No, Arthur, I'm not going to blame you," he said. "I want to hear how you brought off that bark's crew. Is it a good yarn for Minnie?"

At Barcelona the Captain went to hospital and they took off his right arm at the shoulder. The Burdock went back without him, and he lay in his bed wondering how it was that the loss of an arm should make a man feel lonely.

He was quickly about again. Then it was that he discovered a strange thing; it was his right arm, the arm that was gone, that hindered him. The scars of the amputation had healed, but unless he bore the fact deliberately in mind, he felt the arm to be there. He tried to button his braces with it, to knot his tie, to lace his boots and had to overtake the impulse and correct it with an effort. When his clothes were on, he put his right hand in his trousers pocket, then remembered that it was not there, and withdrew hastily the hand he had not got. During the walk the same trouble remained with him; it muddled him when he bought tobacco and tried to pick up the change. Before he slept that night he dropped on his knees at his bedside, and folded the left hand of flesh against the right hand of dream-stuff in prayer.

When his time came to go home in the Burdock, he was an altered man. The quiet, all-observant scrutiny had gone, and the officers who greeted him as he came up the accommodation ladder saw it at once. Arthur Price was now in command, a breezy, good-looking Captain in blue serge and gold braid.

"How is Minnie?" asked the old man as he set down his glass.

"She's all right," was the reply. "I wanted to tell you about that. We go into dry dock when we get back from this trip, and Minnie and I'll get married before I take her out again. Quick work, isn't it?"

The old Captain nodded; the young Captain smiled.

"You'll be bringing Minnie out for the trip, I suppose?" asked the elder.

"That's my idea," agreed Arthur.

"You're a lucky chap," said the old man slowly. He hesitated. "You've got your ship in hand, eh, Arthur?"

"I've got her down to a fine point," said Arthur emphatically. "You needn't bother about me, father. I know my job, and I don't need any more teaching. I wish you'd get to understand that. You know Davis has bought the Stormberg?"

"I didn't know," said the old man with a sigh. "It don't matter to me, anyhow. I'd be reaching for the engine telegraph with my right hand as like as not. No, Arthur, I've done. I'll bother young officers no more."

The run home was an easy one, but it confirmed old Captain Price in his resolution to have done with the sea. Two or three times he fell about decks; a small roll, the commonplace movement of a well-driven steamship in a seaway shook him from his balance and that missing arm, which always seemed to be there, let him down. He would reach for a stanchion with it to steady himself, and none of his falls served to cure him of the persistent delusion that he was not a cripple. He tried to pick things up with it and let glasses and the like fall every day. The officers and engineers, men who had sailed with him at his ablest, saw his weakness quickly, and, with the ready tact that comes to efficient seafarers, never showed by increased deference or any sign that they were conscious of the change. It was only Arthur who went aside to make things easy for him, to cut his food for him at table, and so forth.

From Swansea he went home by train; Minnie and her kindly old father met him and made much of him. Old Davis was a man who had built up his own fortune, scraping tonnage together bit by bit, from the time when, as a captain, he had salved a crazy derelict and had her turned over to him by the underwriters in quittance of his claims. Now he owned a little fleet of good steamships of respectable burthen and was an esteemed owner. He did not press the Stormberg on Captain Price. The two old men understood each other.

"I don't want her," Captain Price told him. "There's a time for nursin' tender engines and a time for scrappin' them. I'm for the scrap heap, David. I'm not the man I was. I don't put faith in myself no more. It's Arthur's turn now."

David Davis nodded. "Yes, then. Well, well, now! It's a pity, too, John. But you know what's best to be sure. I don't want you to go without a ship while I've got a bottom afloat but I don't want you to put the Stormberg to roost on the rocks of Lundy neither. So you wouldn't put faith in yourself no more?"

"No," said Captain Price, frowning reflectively. "I wouldn't, and that's the truth." He was seated in a plush-covered arm chair in Davis's parlor, and now he leaned forward. "It's this arm of mine. It isn't there, but I can't get rid of the feeling of it. I'm always reachin' for things with it. I'd be reachin' for the telegraph in a hurry, I make no doubt."

"That's funny," said Davis, in sympathy. "Well then, you stop visiting with me. I've no mind to be alone in the house when your Arthur's gone off with my Minnie. He'll push the Burdock back an' fore for us and we'll sit ashore like gentlemen. He makes a good figure of a skipper, don't he, John?"

Old Captain Price sighed. "Aye, he looks well on the bridge," he said. "I hope he'll watch the ship, though; she's a big old tub to handle."

The wedding day was a Thursday. The ceremony was to take place in the chapel of which David Davis was a member; the subsequent festivities were arranged for at a hotel. It was to be a notable affair, an epoch-maker in the local shipping world, and when all was over there would be time for the newly-wedded to go aboard the Burdock and take her out on the tide. Old Captain Price, decorous in stiff black, drove to the church with his son in a two-horse brougham. Neither spoke a word till they were close to the chapel door. Then the old man burst out suddenly.

"For God's sake, Arthur boy, do the right thing by your ship."

Arthur Price was a little moved. "I will, father," he said. "Here's my hand on it." There was a pause. "Why don't you take my hand, father?" he asked.

"Eh?" The old man started. "I thought I'd took it, Arthur. I'll be going soft next. Here's the other hand for you."

The reception at the hotel and the breakfast there were notable affairs. Everybody who counted for anything with the hosts was there and after a little preliminary formality and awkwardness, the function grew to animation. The shipping folk of Cardiff know champagne less as a beverage than as a symbol and there was plenty of it. Serious men became frivolous; David Davis made a speech in Welsh; Minnie glowed and blossomed; Arthur was everybody's friend. The old Captain, seated at the bottom of the table with an iron-clad matron on one side and a bored reporter on the other, watched him with a groan. The man who was to take the Burdock out of dock was drinking. Even one glass at such a time would have broached the old man's code; it was a crime against shipmastership. But Arthur, with his bride beside him, her brown eyes alight, her shoulder against his shoulder, had gone much further than the one glass. The exhilaration of the day dazzled him; a waiter with a bottle to refill his glass was ever at his shoulder. His voice rattled on untiringly; already the old man saw how the muscles of the jaw were slack and the eyes moved loosely. The young Captain had a toast to respond to; he swayed as he stood up to speak and his tongue stumbled on his consonants. The reporter on Captain Price's left offered him champagne at the moment.

"Take it away," rumbled the old man. "Swill it yourself."

The pressman nodded. "It is pretty shocking stuff," he agreed. "I'm going to nap on the coffee myself."

It came to a finish at last. The bride went up to change, and old Captain Price took a cab to the docks. The Burdock was smart in new paint and even the deck hands had been washed for the occasion.

"I'll go down with you a bit," he explained to Sewell' the chief mate. "The pilot'll bring me back. I suppose I can go up to the chart house?"

"Of course, sir," said Sewell. "If you can't go where you like aboard of us, who can?"

The old man smiled. "That'll be for the Captain to say," he answered, and went up the ladder.

She was very smart, the old Burdock, and Arthur had made changes in the chart house, but she had the same feel for her old Captain. Under her paint and frills, the steel of her structure was unaltered; the old engines would heave her along; the old seas conspire against her. Shift and bedeck and bedrape her as they might, she was yet the Burdock; her lights would run down channel with no new consciousness in their stare, and there was work and peril for men aboard of her as of old.

"Ah, father," said Arthur Price, as he came on the bridge. "Come to shee me chase her roun' the d-dock, eh?" Even as he spoke he tottered. "Damn shlippery deck, eh?" he said. "Well, you'll shee shome shteering, 'tanyrate."

He wiped his forehead and his cap fell off. The old man stooped hurriedly and picked it up for him.

"Brace up, Arthur," he said in an urgent whisper, "an' let the pilot take her down the dock. For God's sake, don't run any risks."

"I'm Captain," said the younger man. "Aren't I Capt'n? Well, then, 'nough said." He went to the Bridge rail.

"All ready, Mish' Mate?" he demanded, and proceeded to get his moorings in.

The mud pilot came to the old Captain's side.

"Captain," he said, "that man's drunk."

The old man shuddered a little. "Don't make a noise," he said. "He—he was married today."

"Aye." The pilot shook his head. "You know me, Captain; it's not me that would give a son of yours away. But I can't let him bump her about. He isn't you at handling a steamship, and he's drunk."

The old Captain turned to him. "Help me out," he said. "Pilot, give me a help in this. I'll stand by him and handy to the telegraph. We'll get her through all right. There's that crowd on the dock"—he sighed to the festive guests—"waiting to see him off and we mustn't make a show of him. And his wife's aboard."

The pilot nodded shortly. "I'm willing."

Arthur, leaning on the rail, was cursing the dock boat at the buoy. The lock was waiting for them and he lurched to the telegraph, slammed the handle over with a clatter and rang for steam. The pilot and the old man leaned quickly to the indicator; he had ordered full speed ahead.

"Stop her!" snapped the pilot as the decks beneath them pulsed to the awaking engines. Arthur's hand was yet on the handle, but the old man's grip on his wrist was firm and the bell below clanged again. The young Captain wheeled on them furiously.

"'Get off my brish," he shouted. "Down with you, th' pair of you." He made to advance on them, those two square old shipmen; he projected a general ruin; but his feet were not his own. He reeled against the rail.

"Port your helm!" commanded the pilot calmly. "Slow ahead!" Old Captain Price rang for him and they began to draw out. Ashore the wedding guests were a flutter of waving handkerchiefs and hats. They thanked God Minnie was not on the bridge. At the rail, Arthur lolled stupidly and seemed to be fighting down a nausea.

"Steady!" came the sure voice of the pilot. "Steady as you go! Stop her!"

Arthur Price slipped then and came to his knees. Ashore, the party was cheering.

"Up with you, Arthur," cried the old man in an agony. "Them people's looking. Stiffen up, my boy."

"Half speed ahead!" droned the pilot, never turning his head.

The old man rattled the handle over and stooped to his son.

"You can lie down when you turn her over to the mate," he said, grimly. "Till then you'll stand up and show yourself, if your feet perish under you. I'll hold you."

They were drawing round a tier of big vessels, going cautiously, not with the speed and knife-edge accuracy with which the old man had been wont to take her out, but groping safely through the craft about them. Arthur swayed and smiled and slackened, his head nodding as though in response to the friends on the dock who never abated their farewell clamor. The grip on his arm held him up, for he had weakened on his drink as excitable men will.

"Starboard!" ordered the pilot, and Captain Price half turned to pass the word. It was then that it happened. The drunken man, pivoted where he stood and stumbled sideways, catching himself on the telegraph. The old men snatched him upright, for his knees were melting under him, and from below there came the clang of the bell. Arthur Price had pulled the handle over. Forthwith she quickened; she drove ahead for the stern of the ship she was being conned to clear; her prow was aimed at it, like a descending sword.

"Hard a-port!" roared the pilot, jumping back to bellow to the wheel. "Spin her round shore; over with her!" The wheel engine set up its clatter; with a savage wrench the old Captain shook his son to steadiness for an instant and lifted his eyes to see the Burdock charging to disaster.

"Stop her!" cried the pilot. "Full astern!"

Captain Price tightened his grip on his son's arm and reached for the handle with his other hand.

Clang, clang! went the deep-toned bell below and swoosh went the reversed propeller. The pilot's orders rattled like hail on a roof; she came round, and old Captain Price had a glimpse of a knot of frantic men at the taff-rail of the ship they barely cleared. Then, slowly they wedged her into the lock-mouth and hauled in.

"Close thing!" said the pilot, panting a little.

The old man let his son lean against the rail, and turned to him.

"P'raps not," he said. "Pilot, what did I ring them engines with?" The other stared. "I had a hold of him with this hand of mine; I reached for the handle with my—other—hand."

"But," the pilot was perplexed—"but, Captain, you ain't got no other hand."

"No!" Captain Price shook his head. "But I rang the engines with it all the same. I rang the Burdock out of a bump with it; and—" he hesitated a moment and nodded his head sideways at the limp, lolling body of his son—"I rang his honor off the mud with it."

The pilot cleared his brow; he simply gave the matter up. "And what about now?" he asked. "He ain't fit to be trusted with her?"

"No," said Captain Price, firmly. "He's going to retire from the sea; and till he does, I'll sail as a passenger. And then I'll take the Burdock again. She don't care about that old spar of mine, the Burdock don't."